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Siberian Stuff

Being some notes and observations on affairs in Siberia made by a discharged "Duration of War" soldier, recently returned from that country.

Frank Beaman

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SIBERIAN STUFF

When the Allies started guarding the railroad in Siberia, a proclamation was circulated as widely as possible, stating that no interference in political affairs was desired but that the operation of the railway being necessary to the public good, the Allies would do what they could to keep the line working until conditions in Russia are a little more settled and they can handle it themselves.

One place where the American troops are doing guard duty is a little coal road, branching off the main line of the Trans-Siberian at Ugolnia. This branch goes to the Suchan coal mines. Before the revolution these mines supplied coal for about 2000 miles of the main line. This branch line consists of regular railroad to Kanguas and from there on is a combination of narrow guage and cable. Not a very up to date railroad but it did the work. There seems to be an unlimited amount of coal at Suchan and no doubt it will develop into quite a coal region when the country gets thru fighting.

The first troops sent to Suchan were M company, 31st U. S. Infantry, a company of Japanese, 50 Chinese and two squads of Russians. A small detail was left at Kanguas, where the coal has to be transferred from the little narrow guage cars to the regular standard coal cars, another detail was left at Tigrovia to guard a lumber mill that supplies timbers to the mines. The bulk of the outfit, about 500 men went on to the mines

and were quartered for the winter in barracks formerly used by the Russian Army. At that time Romanovka, Novonezia and the other little towns along the line were reasonably peaceful farming communities.

No serious trouble had been happening at the mines when these troops arrived, only that when the country went Free the miners had decided that they didn't like the Superintendent who had been in charge during the old regime so they had fired him and elected one of the miners to be Superintendent. The mines were almost at a standstill.

Coal is a very necessary article in Siberia and the miners saw that someone had to be in charge of getting it out who knew how, so the former Superintendent was reinstated. He secured some much needed supplies, repairs for machinery, etc., and the mines started producing again. The miners appointed a committee to act for them in the way of arguments over working conditions, wage increases, etc., just like a regular union, only it was composed of Russians.

The coal miners and their families are openly Bolsheviki, not that they are any more agreed on what Bolshevikism consists of than the rest of the world but they sure enjoy taking on a few drinks of Vodka and talking about "Free Russia" and this brotherhood of man stuff.

On one of their very numerous holidays about 3,000 of the miners and their families got together for a picnic and parade. The parade formed over at No. 2 mine and came marching over to No. 1, where the Americans were quartered, everybody waving turkey red flags or carrying some kind of banner with bolsheviki slogans on them.

It looked like a raid at first but as soon as the Americans saw that they were unarmed and just celebrating they decided that it was not a time for interference even if they were all waving red flags. Evidently the parade was meant to impress the Americans, at least it stopped right in front of M company's quarters for

a speech-making. One of the spellbinders got up on a stump and started talking, everything was going fine until the audience started to argue with the speaker when it came near turning into a free for all fight.

Everything was peaceable at Suchan all winter except that the two squads of Russian soldiers got on a big drunk one night and started shooting up the town a little, just for fun. No one was hurt, but the Russians were transferred back to Vladivostok shortly afterward.

Frolovka, Kazanka and several other little towns are supposed to be Bolsheviki headquarters—at least they are openly in revolt against the government Kolchak is trying to establish. These communities have lots of political meetings where they appoint committees, elect Generals and everything.

The American soldier is a sociable sort of human and lots of them made friends with the Russians, the language isn't near as hard as it looks in print. The Russian women and children are mostly pretty strong for the American soldier, he is generous with his money, for a few days around payday at least and the kids sure like American chewing gum. When the Ruble is fluctuating all the way from 10 to 70 for a dollar, soldier pay seems like quite a bank roll. One of the many things that the Russians can't understand is the respect the Americans have for womenfolks. When a Russian gets drunk about the first thing he does is to start beating up the women and kids. Sometimes he doesn't have much luck because some of the Russian women are pretty husky. However the Americanskys don't do that and the characteristic seems to have made quite a hit, with the women and kids at least. The Russian men regard the American attitude with about the same concern that the first women suffragists excited here.

H company of the 31st and some more Japanese went to Suchan in March of this year to help out a little on the guard duty there. There's ten separate

mines scattered over five or six miles of country and while numbers one and two are producing the most coal a guard is kept on all of them. Several trains were shot at along this branch last spring and a lot more troops were sent out to guard the railroad. Five companies of the 31st, A, C, D, E, and K, some more Japs and a few Russians from Kolchak's army.

Along in June a bank was robbed somewhere and A. E. F. Headquarters sent out orders to arrest the leader of the gang that did it. Also information that he was somewhere in the vicinity of Suchan. One of H company's Provost guards arrested a man who seemed to answer the description. He was buying everything in town and seemed to have plenty of rubles. He told them that he was a Bolsheviki General buying supplies for his army, which was all right only they decided to hold him for investigation and report to Vladivostok. Which they did. One of the cable power houses had been blown up and the railroad wasn't working very good so communication with Headquarters was held up. While the Bolsheviki General was in jail other things began happening.

Fishing in the Suchan river about five miles from camp was pretty good and it was a popular pastime for soldiers off duty. Saturday night June 21st, Daly, Moore and Bullard of H company went fishing with permission to stay out all night. Sunday morning, the 22nd, Lt. Fribley and Cpl. Read went fishing also. They had a little drosky with an army mule furnishing the motive power. All fine and regular. About noon a Chinaman came in and reported that the Bolsheviki had taken all these men prisoners.

His story seemed straight enough to cause a little uneasiness so some M company ment went out to investigate. Rain had fallen Saturday night so it was no trouble to trail the drosky with the mule. The tracks showed where it had been surrounded and taken toward Novitskaya.

Col. Williams took 110 men from M company and

started to Novitskaya, sending out Lt. Ward, Cpl. Read, Pvt. Flake and Pvt. Craig as an advance guard about 200 yards ahead of the company. About four miles from camp they had to cross the Suchan river wading in the water waist deep. Fine way to be spending a Sunday afternoon.

A Russian on horseback met them just after they had crossed the stream, who volunteered the information that he knew where the Americans were in Novitskaya, and offered to take them to the place. He said they were all in a certain restaurant, drinking and too drunk to come home. Even this was good news but it didn't quite ring true, not that soldiers don't slip out and take a few drinks occasionaly in spite of G. O. No. 20, but the Russkie said that they were all together and while Lieutenants are quite as liable to take a drink once in a while the Army is very strict about officers drinking with the enlisted men. It just isn't done.

At the edge of Novitskaya there's a place on the road where there is a high board fence on one side and on the other a little stream with a brush covered hill beyond. When the column arrived here the church bell in town rang three short rings and a volley of shots came from the brushy hillside. The Russian volunteer guide jumped off his horse, ran up the hillside and started to pick up a rifle. He never got to use it. The Americans spread out and laid down in the road as quickly as possible and returned the fire. Cpl. Heaton told me he had good aim at the Russkie who led them into the trap and he will always believe that he got at least that one Bolsheviki. Bullets were flying pretty thick for a few minutes but only two men in the party were wounded. The prompt spreading out and lying down no doubt saved them from all being killed, even if the shooting from the brush was very poor. As soon as the American had fired a few rounds into the brush the firing from there stopped and when they rushed the hill they found it deserted.

They advanced into town and the first thing they found was their advance guard, Read and Flake dead, Ward and Craig badly wounded. They both died later. It was getting dusk but they proceeded into town looking for the missing fishermen. They never found them but obtained information that they were prisoners and had been taken to Frolovka and were being held by the Bolsheviki there.

The company rounded up 50 or 75 of the male population of the town and made them help in getting the wounded and dead back to quarters. There was no trouble in taking these men prisoners, in fact as soon as the Americans approached a house all the Russkies came out with their hands up and protested that they had had nothing to do with the shooting. The poor devils thought at first that they were all going to be shot down right away and some of them no doubt deserved death. The Americans felt reasonably sure that some of their prisoners were the same ones who had been shooting at them a few minutes before but they all denied it of course. Americans just can't shoot helpless prisoners unles they are sure of their guilt so they turned them loose and sent them home. The trouble in getting supplies in over the railroad was such that H and M company were facing a food shortage themselves. These prisoners would not have minded being held prisoners by the Americans on account of the American Army Chow. The food shortage over there is such that Army chow would look good to a lot of those people.

While the Americans were getting ready to go to Frolovka to try to rescue the prisoners, a messenger came in with word from them stating that they were being treated alright only that the Bolsheviki were holding them and wanted to trade them for the Bolsheviki General that the Americans were holding at Suchan. That was quickly arranged and the exchange made. Whether the Bolsheviki General was the bank robber or not wasn't settled, when the chance came to

trade him for five perfectly good Americans there was no delay in making a deal.

This coal road is a very important part of keeping the Railroad working in Siberia. Whether the trouble there is worse than it is other places or not I don't know, anyhow that is where most of the action participated in by the 31st took place.

Provisional Battalion Headquarters were established at Shkotovo and A, C. D, and E companies had company headquarters there. K company stayed at Ugalnaya. All of these companies saw more or less action, the worst was the A company affair at Romanovka. About 70 men of A company were camped in tents at the edge of Romanovka, their camp was simply surrounded by Bolsheviki and fired on at daylight of June 25th—most of the Americans were in bed yet and the miraculous part of the affairs was that any of them got out alive. However those who were able to get up and around at all put up such a fight that the Bolsheviki left without taking anyone prisoner or capturing anything, also leaving several of their own dead, one of whom was the leader of the gang.

Several heroic stunts were pulled off at this affair; it seems to me the best one was the two fellows who escaped under fire and went to Shkotovo for help—they were both wounded but succeeded in getting thru. Lt. Butler had his lower jaw pretty badly shot off but he nevertheless gave a very good account of himself in the fighting. Garrison Patrick did some good work with an automatic rifle. Sgt. Campbell accounted for one or two Bolsheviks with his automatic pistol, everyone did all they could. I talked to several who got out alive and while I'm sure they all must have did wonders they weren't inclined to brag about it. They simply figured that they were lucky to not be killed instantly like the eighteen who were.

Bunneau had about as close a call as anyone who got out alive, he was badly wounded by the first volley but managed to get behind the woodpile and while

bullets were flying pretty thick all around him he lived thru and the last I heard of him he was in the hospital at San Francisco and getting along fine.

A Russian woman living in a log house near by carried water and did some good first aid work under fire, helping wounded Americans to her house and also taking drinks to men who couldn't get to shelter.

The reinforcements got to the scene of action before noon and the Bolsheviki retreated, the Americans went out after them but didn't succeed in locating them. The wounded and dead Americans were taken to the hospital at Vladivostok as soon as possible.

This affair at Romanovka was written up in the papers here in the States more or less accurately at the time but very little mention was ever made of the fight at Novonezia which happened the morning of June 26th. They were attacked about the same way the detachment at Romanovka were only with quite different results.

This detachment at Novonezia consisted of 48 men from E company, they were evidently a little better prepared for an attack than the A company men were for they had trenches dug, barricades built and also they had outpost guards out who saw the Bolsheviki coming and came in and gave the alarm. When the Bolsheviki arrived the Americans were ready for them. The attack was worked just like the one at Romanocka (probably by the same bunch) i. e., they fired a volley into the tents just at daylight. However the tents were empty, the Americans all being in the trenches or behind barricades of some kind; as soon as the Bolsheviki opened fire the Americans did also with disastrous results for the enemy.

The personality that stands out in the stories of this scrap is Sgt. Jimmy Gardner, an old Regular from back in '98; he seemed to be everywhere at once and kept telling them "keep cool fellows—you may be a little scared—I know I am myself, but we've got it on 'em." They did have too, for tho several men had

close calls no one was hurt while the Reds left several dead and no telling how many wounded they took with them.

Incidentaly that Automatic rifle the Americans are using over there is a wonder, it only weigh 15 pounds and works about like an ordinary rifle only that it shoots 20 shots quick.

The weather in Eastern Siberia was cold and foggy up to the latter part of May, along about the first of June it began warming up a little and started to rain. It was simply wonderful the way the country turned green—it is a brushy, hilly country mostly and the change sure seemed fine after the long winter. The rain sure put the roads in bad condition tho and most of the hiking around this section where the fighting was going on was in the mud. Pretty tough soldiering for a while but the Americans were in good shape and stood it well. I know one man tho who lost twenty pounds in weight between May 19th and August 22nd. A lot of us got too fat last winter.

When communication between Shkotovo and Such -an was cut off; C and D companies hiked, fought and railroaded their way in to Suchan to help out H and M companies.

They were fired on from the hills along the way but had only one casualty, Jack Low of D company got some pretty bad wounds at Sitza. However they got thru.

The S. S. Albany took a load of supplies from Vladivostok up the coast and landed them at Vladimora. All of C, D, H and M company that could leave the mines and a company of about 200 Japs went on this expedition from Suchan to Vladimora—it is only about twenty miles but the roads were very bad and there was shooting at them from the hills along the way. D company had the worst luck of any of the Americans, a volley was fired at them just as they were entering Vladimora that killed Schurter and badly wounded Jefcoat and Ricker, several others were slight-

ly wounded but not seriously. The Japanese company had a few casualties also, two killed and several slightly wounded.

The Albany had in addition it its own crew about 100 men from G company of the 31st and they were all ready to fight their way inland with the supplies if necessary.

Vladimora is a little fishing village of about 2000 and there was no dock or harbor facilities where the Albany could land their supplies easy but they had also brought along some German prisoners from Vladivostok who volunteered for the trip and they did some good work in unloading supplies. These German prisoners wanted to join in the fight but the authorities wouldn't stand for it.

The American Railroad men in Russia are doing some good in the way of helping in the operation of the Trans-Siberian but they have a lot to contend with. Operating a railroad is quite a job itself as most any railroad man will admit, but when bridges are blown up, trains wrecked or held up and robbed frequently and there's a lot of grafting government officials trying to get theirs by giving priority orders, etc., it makes a pretty tough proposition.

There is some pretty fair railroad equipment in use but the labor troubles in Siberia are worse than anyone in the United States who hasn't been in Russia can imagine.

The money situation makes business operations of any kind very uncertain and the employees of the railroad no sooner get a raise in pay than the Ruble depreciates so much in value that it doesn't do much good. Very little of anything is being produced in the country and "The High Cost of Living" is a fright.

The peaceful operation of the railroad in Russia would help things there a lot but the needs of the country are so many and various that no one thing is going to restore order in the country. The cities

need improved public utilities of all kinds, street cars, electricity, water, sewage, etc. There's some good schools but educational facilities are very inadequate to the needs of the population. The Greek Catholic Church is about the only one that amounts to anything in Siberia and it has lost a great deal of its influence since the revolution. There is a crying need for a whole lot of the religion of the Golden Rule.

The country districts need improved farming machinery of all kinds, better stock, up to date information on farming and a whole lot of protection from outlaws. It's pretty discouraging to the Russian farmer who raises a crop to have a gang of bandits make a raid on his storehouses and carry off everything and this is a sadly common occurrence. If the farmer makes any resistance he is killed and his family along with him or maybe the womenfolks are made prisoners and suffer a worse fate than death.

The only government that has any kind of an organization is the one headed by Kolchak, he was appointed or at least assumed the office of Supreme Ruler—to direct everything until such time as the country is a little more settled and can hold an election.

Whether his organization is strong enough to bring order out of the chaos that is in effect there now or not remains to be seen.

The very small percentage of educated Russians are mostly the ones who were "in right" with the old regime. These educated people are pretty solid for Kolchak, and a lot of them are holding office of some kind under him. Some of them are no doubt, square, conscientious people but a whole lot of them are loyal to Kolchak simply because they are gaining some advantage by professing to be so. If they lose faith in Kolchak a lot of them would be just as loyal to someone else as long as it paid. Also no matter how upright a man this Kolchak may be he has to use these

people to the best advantage possible to make any kind of government at all.

The larger portion of the population, call them the "Great Unwashed", Bolsheviki or whatever you please, can't agree on any kind of government themselves but at the same time they are not at all satisfied with what they term "The Kolchak Outfit". It looks too much like simply substituting Kolchak for the former Czar.

The Russians who are educated and keep themselves fairly clean and decent are terribly arrogant, conceited and "stuck up" also they are very much ashamed of and also afraid of their poor, ignorant fellow-citizens who are mostly a pretty dirty, drunken and indecent lot.

This large element of "Roughnecks" is finding out the depths of its ignorance and is "Snapping out of the dope" right along and some day Russia will be a fine country. The stories about undeveloped resources, mines, timbers, farming land, etc., are as glowing as some of the ones the early Spanish explorers had about America.

The American Red Cross is doing a lot of good work in Siberia and there's other institutions that are working for a general betterment of conditions. The country is improving right along but inasmuch as it is just emerging from a condition where most of the people were little better than slaves it is easy to see that they have a long ways to go.

The troubles between the Americans and the Japanese soldiers in Siberia look a great deal worse in the press reports than they do over there, not that there isn't some friction of course but naturally the abnormal and the sensational play a large part in the news. Occasionally the newspapers have an item in them about a baseball game between a picked team of American and Japanese players but the everyday "sand lot" ball games where the score is 26 to 14, and they only play seven innings because a lot of the players have to go

on guard at 4 o'clock don't get much publicity. That isn't news.

There's a lot of fine friendly feeling between the American and Japanese soldiers over there but of course both armies contain a few trouble makers and they naturally get the headlines in the press reports.

Russia is looking to America a whole lot for help of all kinds and I'm sure the authorities in Washington are well informed on conditions in that country and are doing all they can.

Some of the Radical Reds in this country are bad enough but here the forces of law and order are well able to handle them. If the police get overworked there's a lot of returned M. P's in the country who would make dandy officers in civil life.

The sensation of getting back to America is almost worth while spending a year in Siberia for—I never hear anyone grumbling about conditions here but what I think "You ought to spend a year in Siberia, then you would appreciate the United States." "As is."

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